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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BANGKOK 000429

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SUBJECT: CODEL GILLMOR MEETING WITH PM THAKSIN AND PARLIAMENT SPEAKER

Classified By: Ambassador Ralph Boyce, reason 1.4 (b) (d)

¶1. (C) Summary: On January 16, CODEL Gillmor met with Prime Minister Thaksin and with Parliament Speaker Bhokin. Discussion focused on FTA negotiations, F-16s, and Burma. Thaksin voiced confidence and optimism on the FTA while taking the opportunity to vent his anger with the opposition and the media. Thaksin committed (yet again) to pushing his government to lift the ban on US beef, and assured the delegation that his government would follow through on the purchase of F-16s. Thaksin and Foreign Minister Kantathi voiced frustration with Burma. FM Kantathi's promised to use his upcoming meeting with Burma's FM to insist that Burma allow Malaysian FM Hamid to pay a visit to Burma. On the Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI), Thaksin stated that Thailand would first like to see the US reach agreements with some of ASEAN's Muslim members. Thaksin also spoke briefly about his prescription to cure poverty in Thailand. End Summary.

¶2. (U) From January 13-16, Representative Paul Gillmor (R-OH) led a bi-partisan congressional delegation to Thailand which included Jerry Costello (D-IL), Sam Johnson (R-TX), Kay Granger (R-TX), Dennis Kucinich (D-OH), Greg Walden (R-OR) and Bobby Jindal (R-LA). On January 16, the delegation called on Parliament Speaker Bhokin Bhalakula, and then met jointly with Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra and Foreign Minister Kantathi Suphamongkhon.

FREE TRADE, FREE PRESS, FREE BEEF

¶3. (C) Prime Minister Thaksin spoke confidently about progress on FTA negotiations. He advised the CODEL that it is best not to read reports in the Thai newspapers, particularly the Bangkok Post and the Nation, which he described as "readable, but not quotable." Thaksin went on to accuse the print media of attempting to fill the void left by his weak political opposition. Rep. Gillmor expressed concern that the FTA would not reach Congress before the next election cycle. Thaksin responded that there are only 2-3 issues remaining to sort out, and that the agreement should be concluded on schedule. (Comment: The PM's comments are far too optimistic; at a minimum, we do not believe that the FTA talks can be finished on schedule, i.e. by the end of April. End comment)

¶4. (SBU) The Ambassador took the opportunity to remind Thaksin that the RTG has yet to act on lifting the ban on US beef imports. Thaksin appeared surprised that the ban was still in place and stated that the matter is "long overdue". He promised that this would be topic number one in his weekly Cabinet meeting.

¶5. (C) Rep. Granger asked Thaksin if he would guarantee similar attention to the RTG's prospective purchase of F-16s. Thaksin stated that he had assured President Bush and

Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld of this purchase during his

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visit to Washington. He said that they are currently looking into payment options, but assured the delegation that the purchase would move forward.

STRONG WORDS FOR BURMA

¶6. (C) When asked about Burma, Thaksin voiced growing frustration with the SPDC's lack of progress toward democracy and its increasing isolation. Thaksin said that he recently complained to his Burmese counterpart saying "We are uncomfortable as neighbors: you never inform, respect or consider your ASEAN neighbors". He said that he warned the Burmese Prime Minister, "You should not isolate yourself. The only person who can make decisions doesn't come out of the country. You will become like North Korea." Both Thaksin and Foreign Minister Kantathai admitted that they were surprised by the SPDC's sudden move to its capital city. Thaksin compared the move to a company with a negative balance sheet deciding to build a large, new headquarters office. Foreign Minister Kantathai assured the delegation that he will continue to voice the RTG's mounting frustration with Burma when he meets his counterpart in Chiang Rai next week. At the Ambassador's request, Kantathai committed to impress on the Burmese that Malaysian FM Syed Hamid must be allowed to visit Burma soon.

¶7. (C) Thaksin explained to Gillmor that, though Thailand wants to help spread democracy to Burma, it must take a different approach than the US. He said that, as neighbors, they must keep an open dialogue and continue cooperation with Burma on such issues as combating the illicit drug trade.

PSI OBSTACLE

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¶8. (C) Responding to Rep. Costello's inquiry on the status of Thailand's endorsement of the Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI) Statement of Interdiction Principles, Thaksin stated that Thailand is ready to endorse, but does not want to agitate the Muslim population in the South. He said that he felt the US should focus on getting some of ASEAN's Muslim countries to sign agreements first. He specifically mentioned Indonesia and Malaysia.

DID SOMEONE CALL FOR A DOCTOR?

¶9. (SBU) Asked about his most recent anti-poverty initiative, Thaksin quipped, "Poor families have economic illness, and I'm the Doctor." He explained that he was going out to meet with poor families, look at their assets, their debts, their expenses, etc. and then develop case studies and solutions that can be applied to poor families across the country. He boasted that he is confident that he can solve the problem of poverty within the next three years.

MEETING WITH THE PARLIAMENTARY SPEAKER

¶11. (U) CODEL Gillmor also called on the Thai Parliamentary Speaker, Mr. Bhokin Bhalakula. Congressman Gillmor complimented Thailand on its efforts to cooperate with the USG to combat the illegal drug trade, and noted that the two countries needed to "stick together" on issues of democracy. Bhokin told the delegation that while "some say we have limited freedom of expression" in Thailand, "even the Prime Minister can be criticized." Bhokin noted that independent organizations such as the National Counter Corruption Commission (NCCC) serve as 'checks' on all three branches of

Thai government. (COMMENT: This is a rather rosy assessment of the work of the NCCC, which has been hindered by bureaucratic obstacles and other problems. In 2004, NCCC's entire leadership had to resign after being indicted for granting themselves an illegal pay raise; the resulting turmoil paralyzed NCCC for over a year. END COMMENT)

¶12. (U) Congressmen Gillmor and Costello pointed out that the oversight authority of the House of Representatives over free-trade agreements would expire in 2007. Congressman Kucinich noted that failure to pass such an agreement might not necessarily be a bad thing. Bhokin noted that Thailand had successfully concluded free-trade agreements with a number of countries, and believed that one would be successfully negotiated with the United States. Congressman Walden asked whether there was pending legislative action to lift the ban on U.S. beef, in line with comments made by Prime Minister Thaksin. Bhokin noted that high-quality American beef was available throughout Thailand (presumably frozen meat imported before the ban), but conceded that the Thai market was not yet open to new beef imports.

¶13. (C) In response to a question on Burma, Bhokin admitted that Burma was "very embarrassing" for Thailand. He explained that Thailand maintained a policy of seeking good relations with all of its neighbors. He noted that ASEAN members "forced Burma not to accept" the chairmanship of ASEAN and said that the organization was naturally frustrated that Burma had "refused" a previously agreed upon visit from the Malaysian FM, Congressman Gillmor asked if China's recent military buildup concerned Thailand. Bhokin said that China's overall motivations were peaceful, and that the crux of the problem was that the US and Chinese governments did not trust each other.

¶14. (U) CODEL Gillmor did not have the opportunity to clear this message.

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